

## **TOWN MANAGER**

### **Fiscal Year 2014**

I preface my report once again by acknowledging that the progress we are making is largely the result of the tremendous skill, dedication, and work ethic each and every Town employee brings to their everyday work in our collective efforts to be leaders in everything we do. I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that the overall caliber of Town employees at all levels is as good as it has ever been in the modern history of the Town. This is a continuing source of pride to me as their Town Manager.

I would like to list what I believe are the key highlights and accomplishments over the past year. Many of these would not have been achieved without the skill and dedication of the Town staff, the ongoing support and encouragement of the Select Board, and the input from and support of Town Meeting members, the hundreds of community volunteers on Town boards and committees, and the community at large.

- In February, Standard and Poors granted the Town of Amherst a bond rating upgrade to AA+ with a Stable Outlook. S & P cited strong budgetary performance and flexibility further bolstered by the Town's strong management conditions. This is reflective of the continued success we are having in operating our Town government and providing services in a fiscally sustainable way.
- On October 2, the Planning Board approved two development projects by Archipelago Investments that I believe represent the most profound on the ground realizations of the potential embodied in our Master Plan to date. Kendrick Place, in downtown Amherst across from Kendrick Park, will include 44,000 square feet of LEED-certified mixed-use residential on the upper floors and ground floor retail and incubator space for new businesses spinning out from UMass and area colleges. Olympia Place will house approximately 260 beds in suite style dormitory apartments in another LEED-certified complex located near the UMass campus at the end of Olympia Drive.
- At the May 2014 Annual Town Meeting, members approved Article 25, the Planning Board's proposal to rezone the three properties in the 30+ year old Limited Business (B-L) "core" of the Atkins Corner village center, including the Atkins Farm Market and two Hampshire College properties to the west and south, to Village Center Business (B-VC).
- The Town is aggressively taking steps to transform our Information Technology Department from a traditional cost center to a more entrepreneurial "productivity center" under the leadership of IT Director Kris Pacunas and his very talented staff. In 2013, we created the largest outdoor public wifi system in the Commonwealth in the heart of our downtown. The Town and its IT Department applied in December and was awarded three Community Innovation Challenge (CIC) grants from the Commonwealth. Each of these initiatives will generate new revenues that leverage the Town's capital investments in its IT infrastructure.
- As chair of the PVRTA Advisory Board, I successfully advocated for the PVRTA to once again fund bus service to North Amherst beginning September 2014 that for the past 8 years following PVRTA budget cuts was funded 100% by the Town. This reconfiguration of Routes 32 and 37 (Amity Shuttle) to a new combined Route 33 will save the Town over \$100,000 per year in operating costs and provide more frequent and faster service, including a bus stop at the Amherst Survival Center on Sunderland Road.
- The Town, in collaboration with the Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management at UMass Boston, launched our AmherstStat program with initial focus on developing DPW, Police, and Fire Department performance measures.

- A data-driven Compensation Study of non-union positions was completed by our consultant Human Resources Services, Inc. with first-rate assistance from our HR Director Deb Radway. Subsequently, the Select Board unanimously voted to modernize our compensation plan for non-union employees to position the Town of Amherst as an employer of choice in Western Massachusetts.
- Chancellor Subbaswamy and I appointed a Town-Gown Study Steering Committee comprised of a broad and talented cross-section of stakeholders to advise us on our jointly funded study. A consultant team led by U3 Advisors is looking at techniques used by college towns across the country to address town-gown issues, review housing plans from the Town and expansion plans by the campus, and look at the economic development plans from the Town and UMass Amherst.
- I recommended and received Select Board and Town Meeting approval to renovate, primarily for handicapped accessibility purposes, the East Street School in order to relocate LSSE administrative space and create new programming space in addition to the Bangs Community Center. This will allow up to 4,000 square feet of basement space at the Bangs to be potentially occupied and leased in 2015 by a Community Health Center in partnership with the Hilltown Community Health Center and Cooley Dickinson Hospital. Its need has been documented by a multi-year planning process to link underserved residents (families; veterans; homeless; new Americans; seniors; seasonal workers, etc.) to essential health services (i.e. medical, dental, nutrition, social worker).
- The Town was awarded a Municipal Leading by Example Award by the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs in October 2013 for outstanding environmental and energy achievements.
- On June 11, the Town of Amherst was a recipient of one of the Massachusetts Housing Partnership's 2014 Housing Hero Awards for its collaborative efforts to address the Town's affordable housing needs.
- Staff and I worked with developer HAP Housing on Olympia Oaks, a 42-unit affordable housing complex nearing completion on Town-owned land at the end of Olympia Drive. Occupancy is expected in September 2014. A celebratory ribbon-cutting occurred June 13.
- In May, Town Meeting approved Article 34 establishing a Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, a tool being used successfully by 70 other Massachusetts communities to create and preserve affordable housing.
- At the June 3 Special Town Meeting, I was pleased to announce that EQR, the current owner of Rolling Green, has accepted an offer to purchase for Rolling Green from Beacon Communities, a well-respected owner and manager of affordable housing and Beacon's goal is to structure a transaction in which affordability at Rolling Green is maintained. Beacon owns and manages 12,000 apartments throughout the northeast and has extensive experience in affordable and mixed-income housing. I convinced the local Community Preservation Act Committee to increase its commitment of CPA funds from \$750,000 to \$1,250,000. With these funds, Beacon will be able to preserve affordable housing at Rolling Green.
- 2014 road improvement projects in Amherst will total just over \$1 million funded from a combination of Chapter 90 grant funds, settlements, and water/sewer funds.
- In the first 6 months of implementing the Residential Rental Property Permitting Program Bylaw effective January 1, 2014 per recommendations from the Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods Work Group and approval by Town Meeting last year, 99% of properties have applied for permits. This extraordinary outreach by Town staff and the response by rental property owners are achieving the Town's primary objective for on the ground improvements in property upkeep including parking plans in many Amherst neighborhoods.
- In January, the Select Board approved my recommendation to adjust ambulance fees for the first time since 2009 to fund increased firefighter/EMT staffing levels articulated in my FY 15 spending plan.

- Both the Select Board and I thanked our public safety first responders, applauded Chancellor Subbaswamy's response to the pre-St. Patrick's Day disturbances that marred a school year in which student discipline cases and related police calls for service actually declined from the prior year. I supported the university's decision to hire former Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis to develop strategies to prevent such occurrences from happening in the future, and pledged cooperation of Town and public safety leaders to review strategies and tactics with a completely open mind to how collectively we can each contribute to workable solutions.

Respectfully submitted,

John Musante  
Town Manager